

Significant yet Unrecognized: The Informal Learning of Volunteers in Two Settings

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Abstract: This study examines connections between informal learning and volunteer work and values associated among two different groups of volunteers.

Although there are many studies on voluntary work (Chinman & Wandersman, 1999; Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996; Hall et al, 2005), little is known yet about the extent, modes and effectiveness of volunteers' acquisition of new skills, knowledge, attitudes and values, and the relationship between formal, nonformal and informal learning in this process. We know from previous research, however, that there is a stronger association between community volunteer work time and community-related informal learning than between paid employment time and job-related informal learning (Livingstone, 1999). In exploring intersections between volunteering and learning, we were guided by the hypothesis that most volunteers learning is done informally, and that most of the resulting knowledge is tacit and thus difficult to articulate (Polyani, 1966).

The "Informal learning of Volunteers" is one of thirteen projects within the Canadian research network "Work and Lifelong Learning in the New Economy"². Our project, one of two dealing with unpaid work, focuses on the learning processes and outcomes experienced by volunteer workers (Mundel, Duguid, & Schugurensky, 2004; Mundel & Schugurensky, 2005; Slade, Luo, & Schugurensky, 2005). The study includes five profiles of volunteer workers: members of housing co-operatives, participants in local community development organizations, new immigrants seeking 'Canadian work experience', representatives of a marginalized population to a government task force, and providers of direct services in a large humanitarian organization. In this paper, we focus on the housing co-operative and the immigrant volunteer case studies. We pay particular attention to the acquisition of informal learning in these two volunteer settings, and to the recognition of that learning by the individuals themselves and by external agents such as employers and professional regulatory bodies.

Volunteerism: The two cases in the Canadian context

The formal Canadian voluntary sector is made up of 161,000 registered organizations. This figure does not include grassroots organizations or citizens' groups that are not formally incorporated. Volunteer work makes a significant contribution to the Canadian economy, adding \$13 billion per year and representing 11% of total labour contributions (M. Hall et al., 2001; Statistics Canada, 2004, 2005).

People volunteer for many different reasons. The most common ones are to help a cause they believe in, to put their skills and experience into use, to engage with an issue that affects them personally, to explore their own strengths, and to improve job opportunities (Statistics Canada, 2004a). While there is a connection between volunteering and learning, it is important to note that learning is not usually mentioned by volunteers as a key motive for volunteering (Ilsey, 1990; Percy, Barnes, Graddon, & Machell, 1988). Although some researchers have investigated

² This SSHRC funded project, P.I. Dr. David Livingstone, is a part of the Initiative for the New Economy. See <http://wall.oise.utoronto.ca>.

the role of volunteering in improving job prospects (Devlin, 2001) and the relationship between volunteering and the labour market (Vaillancourt, 1994), few studies have specifically dealt with the issues of immigrants who volunteer for 'Canadian work experience' or learning dimensions within housing co-operatives.

Canada has one of the highest immigration rates in the world. Many new immigrants undertake volunteer work as a strategy to re-establish themselves in their professions. The well-documented labour market barriers faced by immigrant professionals with international educational credentials and work experience include non-recognition of credentials, lack of 'Canadian work experience', difficult licensing requirements of professional regulatory bodies and racism (Guo, 2005; Li, 2001; Slade, 2004). Volunteer work provides a means by which they can gain access to Canadian workplaces, get exposure to "Canadian culture" and increase their chances of finding suitable employment.

Within the co-operative sector in general, volunteering is understood as participation and in the housing co-operative case is part of the ethos of co-operative living. Housing co-operatives are member controlled, and the members who live in a co-op are the ones responsible for running it. Each member has a vote and every year members elect a Board of Directors from the membership (Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto, 2006). The Canadian co-op housing movement emphasizes participation, and members are strongly encouraged to volunteer their time to assist on formal or informal basis with the co-op's ongoing operations (Goldblatt, 2000). It is assumed that the effective functioning of co-ops depends on the volunteer efforts of its members, and thus volunteer participation is not compulsory but expected from every member of every housing community. Such participation is normally done through volunteer work in committees and boards.

Methodology and Sample

A draft interview guide was created for each case study and submitted to the consideration of our community partner organizations- the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT), and A Commitment to Training and Employment for Women (ACTEW)³. In both cases we conducted focus groups with our community partners to refine the interview guide. In the case of housing co-operatives, the focus group was comprised of experienced co-op board and committee members, and in the case of the immigrant volunteers, the focus group included representatives from community-based agencies that provided volunteer placements as part of their employment preparation programs.

The co-operative housing sample included 40 co-operative members (23 women and 17 men). All had completed high school, 75 per cent had completed a community college/tech program, and 43 per cent held university degree. One third of the respondents were retired, and approximately 10 per cent were under the age of 29. Through the course of the interviews, 32 indicators of learning in housing co-ops emerged. We asked volunteers to discuss their motivations for joining the co-op, whether they felt appreciated, the sense of value they got from their volunteer work and learning, and whether they felt their learning was recognized by other institutions. We found that due to the tacit nature of most volunteer learning, we needed to employ specific probes in the interview to elicit detailed descriptions of learning.

The immigrant case study included 30 women and 15 men from 17 different countries. We conducted 38 individual interviews and one focus group with seven participants. Almost all

³ We want to thank CHFT and ACTEW for collaborating with us on these two case studies.

participants (96 per cent) had completed at least one university degree and had on average 10 years of professional work experience prior to immigrating to Canada. Professions of the participants included medicine, engineering, business administration, teaching, psychology and information technology. An interesting difference between this group of volunteers and the housing co-op volunteers is their age; no one was over the age of 49. Twenty per cent of the sample was under 29 years and 63 per cent were between 30 and 40 years old. It is important to note that as a group, immigrant volunteers are more similar than different in their volunteering patterns to Canadian-born volunteers (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000). Since our sample was specifically drawn from those who were seeking improved access to the labour market, the volunteers were younger and focused on a specific outcome from volunteer work: increasing their probabilities of obtaining paid work.

Informal learning and its value

Volunteers from both settings indicated that the most important learning in their volunteer work was gained through informal learning. Given the tacit nature of informal learning, it was difficult for volunteers to fully comment on either process or outcomes. At the start of the interviews, most volunteers did not have a conscious understanding of their learning experiences. It was through the reflection processes elicited through the interview that volunteers became more cognisant of the learning dimension of their volunteer work. Volunteers often commented at the end of the interview how surprised they were at the amount and variety of the learning acquired through their volunteer experience.

Volunteers in Housing Co-operatives

In housing co-operatives, volunteers reported learning mostly about self-governance, leadership, democratic attitudes, political efficacy, technical skills and housing co-operative skills and knowledge. Most of that learning was informal and experiential. As one member claimed, "Nothing beats doing it!". The often unintentional and tacit nature of learning was difficult for them to tap into. One member captured this with the following exclamation: "I have learnt everything at CHFT basically through osmosis." Although it was possible to describe new skills, knowledge and attitudes acquired through non-formal learning situations such as workshops and studying educational materials, what they had learnt more informally (e.g. through mentorships, face-to-face situations, networking and practice) was more difficult to recall and pin down. However, through purposeful elicitation, volunteers were able to recall, analyse and appreciate the depths of knowledge and skills acquired informally.

Co-op volunteers felt that their learning was somewhat recognized by educational institutions or employers. Several noted that the recognition of volunteers' learning is difficult when the general public doesn't understand what a housing co-operative is, let alone the volunteer work involved. One member commented, "Generally speaking, I don't think institutions really recognize co-op housing for its contributions and the impact it has made in the city." Another suggested that, "It [co-ops] is something sort of on the fringe, something that people don't know a lot about." However, other members felt that the housing co-operative movement had become "known" in some school programs and that having been a volunteer would show a high level of skill and understanding in key areas, from conflict resolution to specific technical skills. Some members suggested that they thought that some learning acquired in their co-ops should be recognized by post-secondary admissions officers: "People that do any kind of leadership training, say it is a public speaking course or whatever, the skills they have learned in co-ops are paramount in their application (to post-secondary institutions)."

Immigrant Professionals Volunteering for “Canadian Work Experience”

Immigrant volunteers reported that the most important learning they gained in their volunteer work placements were communication skills, the ability to practice workplace English, networking, knowledge of Canadian workplace practices and “Canadian culture”, and working with others from backgrounds different from their own. This learning was facilitated through informal contacts with others, including discussions with other volunteers and staff, observations and unofficial mentoring.

The vast majority of participants indicated that they valued what they had learned through their volunteer work placement. Many reported that the volunteer work had helped to increase their self-confidence and their social networks; they felt hopeful that the volunteer placement would lead to employment appropriate to their academic qualifications and work experience. The informal learning of the immigrants, however, appeared to have been valued more highly by the participants than by employers or regulatory bodies. At the time of our interviews, 42 per cent of the participants were still unemployed and only 13 per cent were working in jobs that matched their education and work experience. Particularly difficult was the situation of immigrants in regulated professions like engineers, accountants, nurses, teachers, doctors or pharmacists. Many of them have to meet specific work requirements to qualify for a provincial licence. Engineers, for example, need one year of work experience supervised by a professional engineer. In our sample, only 29 per cent of the people had volunteer placements that were related to their professions. If immigrants are seeking volunteer work to obtain “Canadian work experience”, and the experience that they gain is not deemed to be valuable by credentializing bodies, then the immigrants are no further ahead in their search for appropriate employment than before their volunteer work placement. This is particularly sad given that the government claims that “Canada values skilled immigrants who can effectively compete and succeed in the country's knowledge-based economy” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006).

Conclusions

A wide spectrum of volunteer work exists, from the one that is freely chosen to the one that is institutionally mandated (e.g. community service), and from one that is motivated by genuine altruism to the one guided by pragmatic self-interest. In real life, most volunteers fit somewhere in between those extremes. This was the situation of many volunteers in our two case studies.

To some extent, both groups of volunteers contributed to something that they hoped to receive some personal gain from. The housing co-op members put much time and energy volunteering into the very place that they live. Co-operative housing, however, is not just another place to live; it is informed by a philosophy that values community involvement in the development of shared living space. People who live in the co-op share this philosophy and see community decision-making structures and co-governance as a meaningful way to live. Besides, volunteering is a way to “pitch in” for the general wellbeing of residents:

Within the co-op structure it is pretty much expected that you are going to be involved as a member of the community as much as possible for the onset of your being a member. So I realized quite quickly that if I didn't get involved in volunteering within the co-op things would not get done.

Many of the housing co-op participants believed strongly in volunteering. Some talked about a lifetime of volunteering, stemming from primary socialization: “it is the way I grew up with my family, you had to do something”. Housing co-operative volunteers also mimicked the general volunteer population in terms of talking about giving back to their community. “You volunteer to help and you feel you are giving back something to the community. The co-op has been marvellous for me”. Also, members volunteered to put their existing talents at the service of the community. As one resident replied on the motivation to volunteer, “I had skills to offer”.

In contrast, all of the immigrants in the study volunteered to improve access to the labour market. Their desire to volunteer grew out of their disconnection from the skills, knowledge and experience that they brought with them to Canada. Volunteer work for them represented a chance to gain “Canadian work experience”. Except for a very small percentage of immigrants, the strategy of pursuing volunteer work as an entrée into paid employment was still unsuccessful. However, the overwhelming majority of immigrants rated their volunteer experiences positively, as these experiences provided them with access to a Canadian workplace. In turn, this allowed them to improve work-related language skills, to familiarize themselves with Canadian work environments, to expand their networks, and hopefully to increase their chances in the paid labour market.

It is interesting to note that the co-op volunteers acquired new knowledge and skills informally through their participation in the workings of the co-op, but due to the tacit nature of their learnt skills and knowledge they did not recognize them and had minimal transference to paid work settings. The immigrant volunteers, instead, did value their informal learning from their volunteer placements, but it was the employers and regulatory bodies who devalued the learning gained from the volunteer placements. This study confirms that informal learning is not only difficult to identify and articulate by the individuals who acquire it, but also often not valued by important players of the larger community. In terms of policy recommendations, we submit that the volunteer work of immigrants should be performed as much as possible in the professional field of the immigrants. Moreover, the knowledge acquired through those experiences needs to be more closely connected to accreditation and recognition systems, including systems like PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition). For housing co-operatives, we suggest highlighting the skills and knowledge acquired through informal learning practices, and connect them with non-formal education initiatives. By doing this, members and the general public, including employers and educational institutions, will begin to recognize the role of housing co-operatives in the acquisition of beneficial social and technical skills and knowledge.

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